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ABSTRACT

The booklet presents a transcript of a public radio program on arts at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, D.C. In the interview, students and the principal discuss their experiences in this high school for students pursuing the disciplines of dance, theater, music, and the visual arts. Music students talk about how the school has helped them grow and learn more about music techniques. In talking about his students, the principal relates that 79 to 80% of the school's graduates go on for more training. Over 95% of the students are Black. A drama student recalls his audition for acceptance to the school and the excitement he felt when he was accepted. Another drama student talks about the school as a status symbol. A graphic arts student describes her progress. The publication concludes with an interview with a voice student as she begins to rehearse a song she has arranged. (Author/RM)

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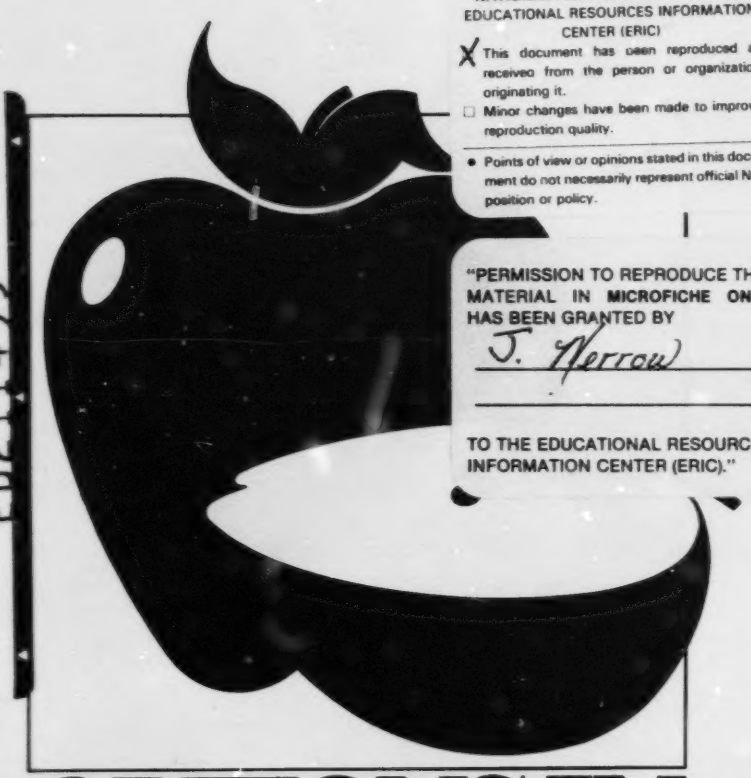

OPTIONS IN EDUCATION

takes listeners to the core of the issues

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"The Duke Ellington School of The Arts"

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George Washington University

"THE DUKE ELLINGTON SCHOOL OF THE ARTS"

Students and the principal of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, in Washington, D. C., talk with NPR's Barbara Reinhardt about their experiences in this high school for students pursuing the disciplines of dance, theater, music, and the visual arts.

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"THE DUKE ELLINGTON SCHOOL OF THE ARTS"

Reinhardt: I'm Barbara Reinhardt for NPR's OPTIONS IN EDUCATION. From the outside it could be any other urban high school, but the large portrait of Duke Ellington over the front door is a tip-off that this school is different.

Dudley: I came home, and the letter was there! And I--I didn't even read the whole letter--I just opened it up and read, "Dear Student," and I ran to the phone to call everybody I knew and told them that I got accepted. I could hardly--I had to dial the number a few times because I was dialing it incorrectly each time. It was, like, a great day for me!

Reinhardt: For the five hundred students at Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, D. C., one of only a handful of such city-run high schools across the country, getting in is only the beginning. Three or four years of intensive training await them, and long days--after five academic classes, when most other high school students would be ready to leave school, kids at Duke Ellington gear up for fresh rigors.

Teacher 1 (in ballet class): Set and a one and two and a one and two and a one and two and three, here we go. Down, up, down, up, all right, hold it. Veronica Combs, why are you trying to do an entrechat-quatre that finishes on point? All right, let me have Vivian's group from the releve arabesque. And that moves down. You're going to move small to the--small to the left and large to the right. Did you get that correction Vicki Wooton? Did you get that? Here we go. Five, six, seven, and down, up, down, up, down, up, down and--get over here! Down, up, down, and down, up, down . . .

Reinhardt: For four or more hours in the afternoon, Ellington students work in their discipline--dance, theater, music, or visual arts. Their energy seems endless. It carries beyond the classroom into the halls and lunchroom.

REINHARDT TALKS WITH MUSIC STUDENTS

Girls' trio singing: "It's a thin line . . . in between love and hate, It's a thin line . . . between love and hate. It's a thin line . . ." (laughter)

Reinhardt (on location): Is this a song that you've heard before?

Student 1: Um, uh huh. It's a song--who's that song by?

Student 2: One of those--it's a song we've heard before though.

Reinhardt: Do you guys sing in a trio together all the time?

Student 3: No, we just jivin' around. You know!

Reinhardt: Are you in music?

Student 3: Mm hmm. Yeah.

Reinhardt: All three of you?

Student 2: Vocal music.

Reinhardt: Vocal music. What do you want to do with it?

Student 3: Be a star! Like Natalie Cole! (laughter) I'm serious! I really do! Even--even if I'm not, you know, I'm not--see, I don't like this opera and stuff really too much at this school. I want to be a star like Natalie Cole. But you know--.

Reinhardt: Why are you at this school if you don't like opera?

Student 3: Because there--they say if you can sing opera you can sing anything, so, you know, I'm just going here to learn, you know, to learn all the techniques and stuff that they say you need--they'll teach you if you, you know--.

Reinhardt: Have you learned anything yet?

Student 3: Yeah, I think--I think before I came here I could sing higher better than I could sing low. I think now I can sing lower a little bit better than I could sing higher. And, you know, they teach you how to read music, and all that stuff, and write it.

Reinhardt: Did you not know how to read music before?

Student 3: I didn't know a thing about reading music or writing, but now I'm learning, you know, slowly but surely!

Reinhardt: Are you? Can you tell the difference?

Student 3: Mm hmm. I sure can.

(Student vocalizing scales with piano accompaniment.)

Music Teacher: More space does not mean more volume, does it? Okay? Or more throat involvement, does it? Okay, the throat's open, but we don't use it. Okay, let's do it again. Faster.

(Student continues to vocalize.)

Student 4: When I first came here, I was strictly into gospel music and rock music, you know, just "screaming music." But now, I've sort of broadened my liking. I like classical music as well, you know. I'm not that into opera, but I can listen to it now, and not just, you know, turn away from it.

Reinhardt: Now you said something about the kind of music you used to like--"screaming music." You said it's bad for your voice?

Student 4: Well, uh, they teach you here how to sing that kind of music without screaming. Okay, I--I'm still singing gospel, but I find now that when I get through singing out like a hard gospel number, my throat isn't hoarse, and it isn't sore like it used to be, you know, because of the technique.

Reinhardt: Could you sing a phrase for me in the way that, maybe, you used to sing, and now in the way where your breathing is better?

Student 4: I--I don't think I could do it the way I used to anymore, but, um--.

Reinhardt: Could you sing me a new one?

Student 4: Okay. Um. (Sings:) "How I get over . . . Comin' on over, all these years, you know my soul looks back and wonders how I made it over . . ."

Reinhardt: That's nice!

Student 4: Thank you. (laughter)

ELLINGTON'S PRINCIPAL TALKS ABOUT HIS STUDENTS

Eldridge: The majority of the students that we get here are . . .

Reinhardt: Principal Maurice Eldridge.

Eldridge: . . . people who think that they want to have a career in the arts in some fashion, that they want to perform, or they want to paint or sculpt--they want to make art. And many of them have the dream of stardom. And some have (laughter) a greater sense of reality and don't necessarily expect stardom. They are enthusiastic, very often committed, and have a stronger sense of who they are and what they want to get out of school, though that is not universally the case because they are, and always remain, adolescents and have the same ambivalence and doubt about their future, as any other adolescent does in this world.

Reinhardt: How many of the graduates will go on in the field they are now in?

Eldridge: Approximately 79 to 80 percent of our graduates go on for more training. And of that number, about 75 percent go on in the fields that they majored in here, which I think is a significantly high number. But I'm not really concerned that they should all end up being artists and stars in the arts. I think it is significant if they come out of here more aware of what the arts are all about, more sensitive to that affective expression that is, I think, a core part of our being, which is neglected, for the most part, in our education and elsewhere in our society. So I think they are enlarged and enhanced human beings just by virtue of this study. If they also go on to be artists, then that's a terrific bonus for them and for us.

Reinhardt: What would it be like for these students if this school were not here?

Eldridge: I think it would be as it was before the school was here--a lot of talent going to waste, unrecognized, undeveloped, or only developed by accident and chance. Many fewer kids who have the potential for this kind of achievement would be getting the real intensive training and support that they need to develop it.

Reinhardt: But aren't these kids self selected? I mean, don't they already have the drive and ambition, and if the school weren't here, wouldn't they get it some other way?

Eldridge: That might be true for a percentage of them, but the fact of the matter is, that in our school system--and in most school systems--there is not a large supportive structure in the arts to help develop and motivate talent. And without that, some of it will die--dry up, evaporate, get pressed out. Very often, if you don't have an institution that is sympathetic, then you can't make it, because being an artist in that kind of world is a very strange world. It frightens parents--they don't want their kids going in an insecure direction. "How are you going to make a living doing that?" Or, "Those people are strange, or bizarre--we don't want our child to do that." So that, really, without an institution like this, I think many of them would not make it, would not be able to choose that direction.

Reinhardt: The school, like most of the other schools in the District of Columbia, is mostly black--over 95 percent black. It is also in a community where--all the houses around here, pretty much, are people who are middle-class or upper-class whites. Do you sense any resentment? How does the community feel about having this school here?

Eldridge: I can't speak about the whole community--and, unfortunately, one has more experience with the people who have a negative feeling about it. But we have a lot of support in this community.

Reinhardt: Have you received letters?

Eldridge: Occasionally. Letters, phone calls, sometimes people will object to the behavior of students, or young people, and because they are black and in Georgetown, they automatically say that they are from Ellington. They aren't necessarily. And secondly, because they are black and young, they aren't necessarily the source of the problems or the trouble that goes on around here. We get more attention than we deserve because of that kind of racial stereotyping and that sort of "knee-jerk" response to the stimulus of seeing a black person in a white environment.

Reinhardt: What's your reaction when people write like that, or call?

Eldridge: I get angry! I am perfectly willing to deal with problems that are real, and if my kids are doing things that they ought not be doing, I will certainly help to solve the problem. But when people call me up and make--consciously or unconsciously--racial slurs, like saying, "They behave like savages,"--that's a quotation--.

Reinhardt: Someone actually said that to you?

Eldridge: To me, on the telephone--I get very angry! And I say to them, frankly, that I have no sympathy with their complaint, once their terminology becomes racist in that way. I just won't countenance their complaint. I am

interested in having the kids be comfortable in this environment and in knowing what they're up against at the same time. And I think that the kids, for the most part, behave very well. It's a--it's a big step for them in this provincial town to leave Southeast and come all the way across town to Georgetown, and I think that it's a growth element for the kids--art students going out of class to do drawings of interesting architecture in the neighborhood, or little parks and trees, and, you know, moving in and out of the neighborhood as if they belonged! And they do--as if they had the right--and they do.

Reinhardt: Maurice Eldridge, principal of Ellington School of the Arts. Dudley is a senior. His major is theater.

DRAMA STUDENT RECALLS HIS AUDITION

Dudley: It's what I really wanted. I mean, the people were warm, and they had really good people--from watching the auditions--you audition with a group--and listening to the teachers, and watching how good the people were--I just wanted to be a part of the group. They were really--I mean there was so much talent, and you just wanted to be a part of it. I wanted it so badly, I was--I was here up at Ellington more than I was at my high school, trying to persuade them to accept me!

Reinhardt: You were talking about the audition. And, I would like you to remember for me a little bit about that day. What was that like? What were you thinking when you went into it?

Dudley: I live all the way across town. And I got here about--the auditions were at nine, and I was here at seven-thirty. I was talking with people and waiting with people to see what the competition was like. I was really scared. But we had a movement part of the class--it was my first movement class in awhile. But they relaxed us. And we--we had articulation exercises and breathing exercises, so--so we wouldn't be so keyed up that we wouldn't be able to go through with our pieces.

Reinhardt: This was before the audition?

Dudley: This was before the audition. They took all this time with us so that we would be comfortable, because--. And then they explained to us how they understood that this might be our first audition for anything, and that--just to take it easy and relax. But we were still keyed up, and it was like--seeing the people go before you--"Oh, she's so good, I'm going to stink!" And "He's so good!" And then they finally called my name, and I did my pieces--I did a poem and a monologue. And then the second round came for us to sing, and they asked me, "Do you sing?" And I said, "Few people call it that!" So I--I tried to joke my way through it--I tried to laugh it off--well this--it wasn't singing! It was undescribable. So, I guess they liked my monologues, because it wasn't the singing that got me in!

Reinhardt: Did you have a feeling when you left that day whether you were going to make it?

Dudley: Mmm. I had a good feeling, but it was--like I auditioned in April, and May passed and I hadn't heard from anybody. But I heard from other people who had auditioned with me that had been accepted. And then June came along, and hadn't heard anything. I came--I kept visiting and bringing things, and bringing more things, and--.

Reinhardt: Like what things?

Dudley: Recommendations, and--I was just up here--some people still believe that I have been here for three years, even though I've only been here for two. And, on the very last day of school at my other school, I came home, and the letter was there. And I--I didn't even read the whole letter! I just opened it up and read, "Dear Student," and I ran to the phone to call everybody I knew and told them that I got accepted. It was like--it was great, because my father thought that I had gone crazy because I threw the letter up, and ran for the phone. And I could hardly--I had to dial the number a few times because I was dialing it incorrectly each time. And I called Anita Jackson, who goes here--she's in my class--and told her. Then I called up my friends from my other school--it was, like a great day for me!

DRAMA STUDENT DISCUSSES HER EXPERIENCE

Goldfield: Is it a big status symbol around the neighborhood to have gotten in?

Cynthia: Yeah, yeah. A lot of people are saying wow, you know, that's great! Whenever you go to a party, there's always--you know, it's really boring and there's nothing to do, and you just say, "Well, I go to Duke Ellington!" And everyone says wow, you know, and then you have something to talk about for the next two hours or something. So it's really--I really am happy with just--.

Goldfield: How do you think you're different from your friends who go to just a regular high school? What do you think you're gaining by being here, and is there anything that you might be losing?

Cynthia: Um, I think I'm gaining a lot more knowledge of myself, of who I am, who is Cynthia Griffith, you know, just, really who is--. I think I've--I'm a lot more together than a lot of my friends who stayed at my old school, and--.

Goldfield: Why is that? Just because you're having a chance to do theater?

Cynthia: Yeah, just be--the theater, and the people, the teachers here are just, you know, they're so nice. Like if you have a problem or something, you can tell them, or if--if you're not doing too well in a class, I mean, the teacher is not going to tell you you're stupid! Which--I had a few teachers who told students they were stupid last year, and it just really--it really disturbed me. But this year it's a lot--it's a lot more like a family, and it's--everyone's a lot closer and stuff. And I feel better about myself--a lot better than I did last year.

Goldfield: You talk about a sense of family here. What about a sense of competition? You're all in the arts, and somewhere there must be competition between the students. Have you encountered that?

Cynthia: Not so much in the theater department, but--well, the theater department still has its competitions. I don't think the people show it as much, but in the dance department, I've heard a story about last year--they, uh--these two girls had this one part--these two dancers--and one dancer wasn't going to be on stage but wanted to, and she took out all the seams out of the costume! So when the other girl put on the costume, she--all the seams came off and the costume fell all apart. So she--neither one could go out on stage. So, I don't think it's that bad in the theater department. So, I don't know, I don't think there is that much.

Goldfield: Do you have any idea why there are so few white students here?

Cynthia: Oh . . . I think there should be more. They--I guess a lot of people are really turned off because there are so many black students. Like when I said I was going here, a lot of students said, "You're going there? I mean, there are so many black students there. There aren't any white." And it's just--I just really didn't care, because there wasn't--really, there's not really any difference. And if you just--I just--I just completely, you know, set aside their race, and they set aside my race. So a lot of students also are--kind of say, "Well, the academics aren't as good." But I think the academics are as good. They're just, you know,--it's just that I think it's a lot better here than it is at my old school. Yeah.

DRAMA STUDENTS REHEARSING "PURLIE"

Girl: Oh, I've missed that Reverend Purlie. I really have. Take mens. All my life they've never looked at me the way other girls get looked at.

Anthony ("Purlie"): Aw, that's nonsense. The first time I saw you up there in the junior choir I gave you that look!

Girl: You did? Oh, I thought so, I prayed so. All through your sermon I thought you would faint--I thought I would faint from hoping so hard. Oh, Reverend Purlie, I think that's the finest . . . .

Drama Teacher: Just let go. Act as if you are going to go pick a compulsion, like I am going to jump--I am jumping for God, I'm jumping for joy. "Testify, testify," you know, like you have springs--see, springs in your knees--like you can't sit still, you can't stand still, you can't stay in one position. Put the springs--the compulsion--put the springs right in your kneecaps and see what happens.

Anthony: Yeah, I know, but it's just--now I have to think about the little eye movement or lip movement or the scrunching of the eyes, you know, something like that, I

have to think about that. But I--that's because I just don't feel comfortable with the character, and I keep missing my lines. It's just--.

Drama Teacher: Don't get yourself set into a habit. So many people have done Purlie--it's been done so many hundreds of times that you can carry without even knowing you're doing it--you can carry in the back of your head how a million other people have done the part. Don't even think of them. Because that starts putting you into habits--it starts giving--bad habits, because you're not the same people, Anthony, you're different, you know. So you've got to open yourself up--you've got to start loosening up--relax a little bit. You--you're holding your body--everything is being very stiff. As a result, things are coming out like--this is the way you say this line, you know. That's not the way everybody says that line. Maybe it's not the way you say that line. But you don't know that. You're not giving yourself a chance to find out.

Anthony: Also, I feel like, there's the thing, because they're in here, right, that if I talk too loud, I interrupt them, right. Now one point--at one point from--.

Drama Teacher: Now don't--don't use that as an excuse. You're going to find yourself sometimes doing TV or movies where you will have so many people making so much noise around you--you have a hundred technicians--like the woman right now with the mike. There will be five million of them standing on top of you, and you're doing a love scene--a passionate, intimate love scene, and you've got to pretend those people are not there. You've got to be able to feel who you are and what you're doing right in the middle of all of that. So you--see that's a blessing that they're making so much noise. That's a blessing if there's a microphone in your mouth.

Anthony: Okay, well, I guess I'll do it with.

Drama Teacher: Kids are absolutely fantastic! The talent is so--so creative, it's so original, so unique. They have to go through so much to get into the school. They come from such far distances, you know. I mean, for high school kids, they're getting up at five--six in the morning. Sometimes some of them travel two hours in the morning, two hours at night. They work all day long, the whole afternoon for the arts program, you know, so there has to be tremendous dream and vision to come here. So as a result, they pour themselves into it. You see it, you see it.

Reinhardt: Do you worry about the kids, that they work too hard? Are they going to miss something?

Drama Teacher: Oh, no. No, no, no. There's too many kids that aren't using their energies. They have energies to do this 24 hours a day if they have to. And I think it's good for them--the more they work, the more they pour into it, the better it is.

Reinhardt: Well, aren't they missing just having fun and being silly?

Drama Teacher: No, they're having fun. They're silly then they--they use all of their imagination, all of their creative imagination coming out. It's much better than hanging around corners--what do they have to do, you know. There's no place. Where is there for teenagers to experiment, to feel, you know, to deal with each other.

GRAPHIC ARTS STUDENT TELLS OF HER PROGRESS

Graphic Arts Student: When I first came here, and I looked at other people's drawing, I was, like, I was ashamed to draw, because I was scared, nervous, and I didn't want nobody to know that I couldn't draw. But I--they said that I had talent and I had potential, and I could do better at it. So I worked at it, then it brought me to where I am now.

Reinhardt: How did you draw then, and how is it different today?

Graphic Arts Student: Well, they've taught me about tone, value--.

Reinhardt: What's value?

Graphic Arts Student: Value is--it's like a scale on how light, how dark the object can go. That gives it a three-dimensional sense.

Reinhardt: Then what else did you learn?

Graphic Arts Student: Composition, perspective--see, drawing isn't really just sitting and putting a pencil, or whatever medium you're using--it's also knowing the ability of how to do it, to make it better. Because you must know all of these things. If you don't know it, your art will never become what you want it to be.

Reinhardt: What do you think they saw in you? You said, they said you had potential when you came. What did they see in you? You said you didn't see much in yourself.

Graphic Arts Student: Well, then--they saw my work and what maybe really got to them was the way, you know, I told them that I wanted to develop myself, that I wanted to be good, and my determination made it--made to them seem that I could do it if I wanted to.

Reinhardt: Do you come from a neighborhood where you're one of the few kids who comes here?

Graphic Arts Student: Yes! There's hardly nobody--well, there's one person that, you know, lives around me that goes to Duke Ellington. But it's like, the people around me, I think they give me respect because I go to Duke Ellington.

Reinhardt: How do you see that?

Graphic Arts Student: Because, I mean, I'm really trying to do something for myself. There's something that I can do and people know that I'm trying to be better at it--not just hanging on the street or going to school because I

have to. I'm going to school because I really want to.

Reinhardt: Have any of them said anything to you?

Graphic Arts Student: Well, this--maybe it's me, but I love to take my work and show off, you know, so I'll run over to my friend's house or somebody's mother and show them my work. And they say--they always say, "Now, why don't you do something," you know. I'm not, like, you know, always on the phone, talking to boys, talking to my friends, and all that. So they use me like an example.

Reinhardt: You put pressure on your friends, huh?

Graphic Arts Student: Yeah! (laughter) I mean, but I love it, you know. I love to be big.

VOICE STUDENT REHEARSES A SONG SHE HAS ARRANGED

Voice Student (sings): "Believe in yourself, right from the start, believe in the magic that's still inside your heart. Believe all these things, not because . . ."

Music Student: Do you want to do it? Go ahead and do it, now.

(Piano playing as she works on arrangement.)

Voice Student: This arrangement is a whole different arrangement from hers. It's a whole different arrangement.

Music Student: This is your arrangement?

Voice Student: Mm hmm.

Music Student: Oh.

Voice Student (sings): "Believe in yourself, right from the start, believe in the magic that's inside your heart. Believe all these things, not because I told you to," and then it goes, "but believe in yourself, you believe in yourself, if you believe in yourself, then maybe I, then maybe I, believe in you."

Voice Student: So try to get her out of your ear, and just?

Music Student: Yeah, I'm following you anyway.

Reinhardt: If you want a cassette or printed transcript of this Options in Education program, call the following toll free number: 800 253-0808. A cassette costs six dollars, the transcript, two dollars. The number again is 800 253-0808. In Michigan, call 616 471-3402. That's how to get copies of our programs. Now if you want to write directly to us with your thoughts, send your letter to National Public Radio--Education, Washington, D. C., 20036. Options in Education is a coproduction of National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University. Support for the series is provided by the National Institute of Education and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Options in Education is produced by John Merrow. Our associate producer is Mary

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